R8780-1

PRRC emerging trends

Published by the Princeton Religion Research Center

February 1992

Volume 14, No. 2 ISSN 0889-8936

What Is Truth?

About 2000 years ago Pontius Pilate asked "What is truth?" and then washed his hands in public to show his disdain for such questions. Today, the public is divided sharply between those who say determining the truth is largely a matter of individual experience and others who rely on Scripture or religious leaders to guide them.

Over four American adults in 10 (43 percent) look inwards and say their own experience is the most reliable guide to truth. Other secular sources of truth cited by the public as ultimate arbiters are the teachings of their parents and other authoritative figures (16 percent); the teachings and findings of science (7 percent); and, what they learn from the media, such as television, newspapers and books (6 percent).

Disagreeing are three persons in 10 (31 percent) who say they rely instead on the teachings of Scripture, such as the Bible or the Torah, as being the most reliable authority in matters of truth. An additional 3 percent say they follow the words of religious leaders as their guides to truth.

Young adults place most confidence in their own experience, but as people grow older many find Scripture becomes a more reliable authority in matters of truth. Among young adults under age 30, for example, 47 percent rely most on their own experience and just 22 percent yield to the authority of Scripture. By contrast, among those who are 60 or older, a plurality of 41 percent cite Scripture as the most believable source, compared to just 30 percent who still rely on their personal experience.

Scriptural authority is of greatest importance to those who describe their religious beliefs as very conservative, while religious liberals are far more likely to rely on personal experience in matters of truth. Among those with a fundamentalist approach to religion, half (50 percent) say they consider Scripture the ultimate authority, and just 29 percent rely on their own personal experience. The opposite pattern is found among self-designated religious liberals, with 55 percent relying on personal experience, and just 17 percent seeking truth from Scripture.

Political liberals also are least likely to rely on Scripture (13 percent) for guidance in seeking truth, and to put their trust instead in personal experience (50 percent), science (18 percent), or the media (11 percent). Those who espouse political conservatism tend to be more reliant upon the authority of Scripture (44 percent) than on personal experience (33 percent).

(continued on page 4)

In God We Trust?

Following the war in the Persian Gulf last year there was a surge of patriotism in the United States but a Gallup Poll taken shortly before the Fourth of July found that many people still are a bit shaky on the historical facts about their own country. Included in the test was a question about the official motto of the U.S. It is inscribed on every dollar bill and nickel, but less than one adult in three knew the correct answer is "In God We Trust."

On another question in the same survey, however, 35 percent said they would prefer to see "God Bless America" as our national anthem, compared to 40 percent who would favor retaining the "Star Spangled Banner."

Fundamentalists and Secular Humanists Are a Cause of Concern to Many

Religous fundamentalism has been a center of debate in America since the time when the first colonists reached the shores of New England. Contrary to popular belief, the term "fundamentalism" is not synonymous with evangelism or "born-again" Christianity, but instead is commonly used to describe those who unswervingly seek to obey the moral teachings of their faith, which they believe are founded on the absolute authority of Scripture. Although many fundamentalists may have little in common with the "Moral Majority" or with televangelists, the general public frequently associates them with these movements and personalities. When the Moral Majority was perhaps at the peak of its power, only 28 percent of the nation said they favored the movement, while 39 percent voiced their opposition to it and 33 percent held no opinion about it. A 1989 Gallup Poll found that three Americans in 10 (30 percent), would not like to have religious fundamentalists as neighbors.

Currently, half of the nation's adults are concerned about religious fundamentalism, with 21 percent saying they are very concerned and only 29 percent fairly concerned. Not too concerned are 28 percent, while 14 percent are not concerned at all. The remaining 8 percent hold no opinion about religious fundamentalism. In answering the question, all respondents may not have been thinking solely of Christian religious fundamentalists in this country, since the term also often is used by journalists and political pundits to characterize such disparate groups as the Shiite Muslims of Iran, the Sunni Muslims of Saudi Arabia, and the ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel.

"Secular humanism" is a collective term used to describe people from the time of the Enlightenment to the present day whose moral reasoning is relative, rather than based upon religious-inspired moral absolutes.

About one person in three expresses concern about secular humanism, with 12 percent saying they are very concerned, and 24

CONCERNS ABOUT BELIEFS

I am going to read you a list of social and political issues that are being discussed today. For [statements below], please tell me how concerned you are personally – very concerned, fairly concerned, not too concerned, or not at all concerned?

	Concerned about religious fundamentalism	Concerned about secular humanism
NATIONAL	50%	36%
Male	47	33
Female	53	39
Under 30	46	29
30 - 44	48	34
45 - 59	56	41
60 & older	52	41
Education		
College graduates	47	31
Attended college	49	37
High school graduates	53	37
Non-H.S. graduates	49	37
Religious beliefs		
Very important	60	44
Fairly important	44	28
Not important	26	22
Political beliefs		
Very liberal	44	30
Very conservative	57	45

percent who are not too concerned, and 14 percent who are not concerned at all. The term probably is not as well understood as "religious fundamentalism," and as a result, about one person in four (26 percent) is unable to give an opinion about it. When those who hold no opinion about secular humanism are removed from the sample, the resulting division of opinion is much closer, with 48 percent saying they are concerned about it and 52 percent unconcerned.

Although factors such as political ideology or interest in religion often are thought to play a significant role in determining attitudes towards the respective beliefs, this does not appear to be the case. The conventional wisdom is that the deeply religious and politically conservative hold congenial opinions about religious fundamentalism and are concerned about secular humanism. It turns out that the politically conservative and deeply religious usually are more concerned about both movements than are their liberal non-religious counterparts.

Indeed, most likely to be concerned about both moral philosophies are those people who say their religious beliefs are very important to them. Six in 10 (60 percent) of those in this category express concern about religious fundamentalism, while 44 percent say they are concerned abut secular humanism. By contrast, and contrary to some popular conceptions, among those who say religious beliefs are not important to them, only 26 percent are concerned about religious fundamentalists and 22 percent about secular humanists.

Those who describe their political beliefs as very conservative are somewhat more concerned than those who are very liberal about religious fundamentalism, by a margin of 57 percent to 44 percent. Ultra-conservatives (45 percent) are also more concerned than ultra-liberals (30 percent) about secular humanism.

Few Believe in Moral Absolutes, but Most Want To Follow God's Teachings

It is a debate that has been going on for more than 2000 years: Is "man the measure of all things," including determination of what is right or wrong in life, or are there moral absolute truths known to man from God or Scripture? A survey taken earlier this year suggests that many Americans have taken a compromise position that they do not believe in moral absolutes, but do feel they are obeying God or Scripture when making ethical decisions. While most who characterize their religious and political views as conservative are the most likely to believe in moral absolutes and claim to follow the revealed word of God, even a majority of moderates and liberals hold similar views.

The majority of people say it is important, if not essential, to follow the teachings of God and Scripture in moral and ethical matters, but many appear also to believe that they, themselves, should judge what is right or wrong on a case-by-case basis.

In an age of relativity it perhaps is not surprising that about seven adults in 10 (69 percent) believe there are few moral absolutes. Only 27 percent of the populace disagree with the assertion that there are few moral absolutes and that matters of what is right or wrong must be judged as each situation arises.

Despite their denial of moral absolutes, many also assert it is absolutely essential (32 percent) or very important (38 percent) in situations of determining what is right or wrong to do what God or Scripture tells them is right.

The nature of one's religious and political beliefs appears to have an important bearing upon how people respond to these matters. Political liberals (85 percent) and those who say their religious views are liberal (77 percent) are the most likely to feel there are no moral absolutes in life. This attitude weakens slightly among those who characterize their political (69 percent) and religious (73 percent) views as "moderate." But even those who say their political (55 percent) and religious (57 percent) views are conservative, a slight majority embraces a philosophy of relativism in ethical matters and rejects the concept that there are moral absolutes.

Not surprisingly, religious conservatives (83 percent) are also more likely than moderates (70 percent) or liberals (51 percent) to consider it absolutely essential or very important to do what God or Scripture tells them to do.

Most accepting of the authority of God or Scripture are those who say religion is very important in their lives (91 percent), but 63 percent of this group also rejects the concept of moral absolutes. At the other extreme, only 18 percent of those who say religion is not important in their lives accept the authority of God and Scripture, and 81 percent reject the existence of moral absolutes.

OPINION OF MORAL ABSOLUTES

Please tell me whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statement–There are few moral absolutes: what is right or wrong usually varies from situation to situation.

	Agree	Disagree
NATIONAL	69%	27%
Male	70	27
Female	68	27
Under 30	73	22
30 - 44	67	29
45 - 59	67	29
60 & older	69	26
College grad	65	34
Attended college	67	30
High school grad	72	25
Non-H.S. grad	70	20
Religious beliefs		
Very important	63	33
Fairly important	75	22
Not important	81	15
Religious conservative	57	39
Religious moderate	73	22
Religious liberal	77	20
Political conservative	55	43
Political moderate	69	26
Political liberal	85	13

NOTE: "No opinion" (4 percent, nationally) omitted.

(Continued from page 1)

BEST SOURCE FOR TRUTH

What is the most believable authority in matters of truth?

	Personal experience	Scripture	Parents	Science	Media	Religious leaders
NATIONAL	43%	31%	16%	7%	6%	3%
Male	44	28	15	10	5	4
Female	41	34	16	5	6	3
Under 30	47	22	17	8	5	3
30 - 44	48	28	16	7	6	3
45 - 59	44	34	14	7	5	3
60 & older	30	41	15	7	5	4
College graduate	47	23	12	13	8	2
Attended college	46	31	14	9	5	3
High school grad	42	32	18	5	5	3
Non-H.S. grad	34	37	18	4	5	6
Religious conservative	29	50	12	4	3	4
Religious liberal	55	17	14	12	7	2
Political conservative	33	44	12	6	5	3
Political liberal	50	13	9	18	11	4

NOTE: The table adds to more than 100%, because some respondents named more than one source.

The findings reported on pages 1-4 of this issue are taken from a study that was conducted by the Gallup Organization for Americans United for Life. The study findings are based on telephone interviews with a representative nationwide sample ot 2,104 adult men and women, ages 18 and older, conducted in May 1991. For findings based on samples of this size, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be 2 percentage points in either direction. For additional information regarding the overall study, contact:

Americans United for Life
343 South Dearborn Street
Suite 1804
Chicago, IL 60604

Myths and Realities about Teens and Religion

The following article is taken from a new book, ***The Religious Life of Young Americans*** *by George Gallup, Jr. and Robert Bezilla, which is being published this month by the George H. Gallup International Institute.*

Surveys have always been very helpful in dispelling myths about public opinion and beahvior. And nowhere do more myths seem to abound than in the presumptions about how young people in this country regard religion.

In studying the religious views and practices of America's teenagers, college students, and young adults, we have found over the years that many commonly held assumptions about them just do not stand up to the close scrutiny of survey evidence. Here are the major myths about young Americans and religion, as contrasted with Gallup Poll and Gallup Youth Survey findings.

MYTH: God is dead because young people do not believe in him anymore.

REALITY: Nearly all young people in this country believe in God or a universal spirit.

✞

MYTH: Well, if they believe in God, they probably think of him as some abstract entity of nature force.

REALITY: The great majority of young people hold a belief in a personal God; one who observes their actions and punishes or rewards them accordingly.

✡

MYTH: Young people usually have the attitude that they are immortal, and as a consequence, do not have to think much about a life hereafter.

REALITY: Young people actually are more likely than their elders to believe there is heaven where the good are rewarded and a hell where the wicked are punished.

✞

MYTH: Young people just go through the motions and only pray or read Scripture when they are in public.

REALITY: The majority of young people report that they pray and read the Bible at times when they are alone and no one is observing them.

✡

MYTH: Teens think Sunday school and church-sponsored youth groups are hokey and boring.

REALITY: Teens generally give high marks to the youth groups, religious instruction, and youth ministers.

✞

MYTH: They go to youth groups at church only to meet members of the opposite sex, or because they are made to go.

REALITY: Some do, but more say they go because it helps them to deal with their problems and worries, or to gain better understanding of their religion.

✡

MYTH: Only the Lawrence Welk generation watches or listens to TV or radio ministries.

REALITY: One teen in three tunes into the "electronic church" at least monthly.

✞

MYTH: Today's young people are greedy and narcissistic.

REALITY: The spirit of voluntarism and charity is alive and well – especially, among young people who go to church. Even more young people would volunteer their services if someone would just ask.

✡

MYTH: Soon after entering college, students usually become atheists or agnostics.

REALITY: Although many students stop attending church at this period and may ask a lot of questions, most do not lose their faith. The very few who flirt with atheism or agnosticism may regain their faith later in life.

✞

MYTH: Young people think religion is too old-fashioned to answer the complex problems of modern day life.

REALITY: Most young people reject the notion that religion is no longer relevant in the modern world.

✡

MYTH: Don't tell me that today's young people also want "that old-time religion."

REALITY: Religious fundamentalism is just as strong among the young as the old, but so also are moderate and liberal religious beliefs.

For more information on ***The Religious Life of Young Americans****, or to order a copy, call The Gallup International Institute at 609-921-6200 or write to 47 Hulfish Street, P.O. Box 389, Princeton, NJ 08542.*

Announcing 1992 Religion in America Report

The soon to be published **Religion in America Report** marks the 25th anniversary of the initiation of these regular and eagerly-awaited publications, which present facts and interpretations of the latest trends in religious beliefs and practices, as well as the public's changing views on the impact of religion on society.

Many of the indicators reported have become the basic standard measurements of organized religion in the United States.

This report will present a detailed analysis of church attendance and membership by key population groups, and by major faiths and denominations. A special commentary by George Gallup, Jr. will set forth the major challenges and growing opportunities facing churches in the immediate years ahead.

If you preach, write, or teach, we sincerely believe you will find this PRRC publication to be a constant aid in your mission.

Special pre-publication offer: Those who order **Religion in America, 1992** before May 1, will also receive a free copy of **100 Questions and Answers: Religion in America.** Written by George Gallup, Jr. and Sarah Jones, this book contains 100 of the most important questions we have surveyed in the area of religion.

This book, which represents the distillation of many recent Gallup surveys, deals in depth with each of 100 topics - analysis by key demographic groups, trends, background information and tables. Selections include religious belief and ethics, religion and politics, religious experience and spiritual development and commitment.

To receive **Religion in America 1992** and your complimentary copy of **100 Questions and Answers: Religion in America** send your check or money order for $30 to Princeton Religion Research Center, 47 Hulfish Street, P.O. Box 389, Princeton, NJ 08542.

EMERGING TRENDS is published monthly except July and August by the PRINCETON RELIGION RESEARCH CENTER. The Center, founded in 1977, is an inter-faith non-denominational research organization with headquarters in Princeton, New Jersey. The PRRC specializes in creative actionable research, utilizing the world-wide attitudinal and behavioral facilities of Gallup International. The purpose of the PRRC is to gain a better understanding of the nature and depth of religious commitment in the United States and abroad and to explore ways this information can enable religious leaders to promote spiritual growth. A one-year subscription can be obtained for $35.00. Inquire: **Publications Department, P.O. Box 389, 47 Hulfish Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08542 (Telephone 609/921-8112). POSTMASTER: PLEASE NOTIFY US OF ADDRESS CHANGE.**

PRINCETON RELIGION RESEARCH CENTER
47 Hulfish Street, Suite 213
P.O. Box 389
Princeton, New Jersey 08542

FIRST CLASS
POSTAGE
PAID
Permit No. 175
Plainsboro, NJ 08536

Congressional Info. Ser v.
SRI
4520 East West Highway
Bethesda, MD 20814

First Class Mail